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Stevenson's Poetry

Penny Fielding

In 1883 Stevenson wrote to his friend W. E. Henley: 'You may be surprised to hear that I am now a great writer of verses.' ¹ Readers today may likewise be surprised to think of Stevenson, the famous storyteller, as a poet. Or perhaps they may conclude that he was not a poet really, but, as he himself often claimed, a writer merely of 'verses', especially for children. In this chapter, we will see what kind of a poet Stevenson was, and what was the relation of his 'verses' to poetic forms of his day, as well as to his own ideas about aesthetics, travel, and time. Stevenson published only three collections in his lifetime: *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), *Underwoods* (1887), and *Ballads* (1890). Following his death in 1894, *Songs of Travel* was included in the *Edinburgh Edition* of his work in 1895, and issued separately the following year. Further poems appeared posthumously in collected editions, and in a volume called *New Poems* in 1918.

Of his poetry for adults, Stevenson's most famous stanza is perhaps this one:

This be the verse you grave for me:

Here he lies were he longed to be;

Home is the sailor, home from sea,

And the hunter home from the hill. ²

These lines, the second stanza of the poem 'Requiem', were inscribed (with the addition of 'the sea' in the third line) on Stevenson's grave in Samoa. Among the many tributes written after Stevenson's death, A. E. Housman composed his own version of 'Requiem', which includes the stanza:

Home is the hunter from the hill:

Fast in the boundless snare

All flesh lies taken at his will

And every fowl of air. 3

Housman requires us to read Stevenson in an unexpected way. The original stanza, with its melodious expression of a longing for home that might finally be satisfied at the end of life, changes to something much darker—the security of death is now expressed ominously as a ‘boundless snare’ that rapaciously captures life. This poses quite a challenge: contemporary reviewers were apt to use words like ‘graceful’, ‘charming’ and ‘attractive’ to praise Stevenson and few recent critics have challenged this view, leaving the impression of a poet whose works are slight and cheerful. To leave Stevenson’s poetry there, however, is to miss the darker, more complex or ambiguous elements conjured up by Housman’s elegy. Stevenson often wrote quickly and did not publish all that he wrote, so reading his ‘verses’ as a complete poetic corpus is not always helpful. But his best work shows us how dedicated he was to poetry as a craft, and how he could use it to express the same tensions as well as hopes that we find in his novels and stories.

Stevenson was writing at a time when there was no obvious single readership for poetry. The long era of Tennyson was coming to an end, with the reading public anticipating his death (it finally took place in 1892). Matthew Arnold’s hope that British society would follow the path of ‘the idea of beauty and of a human nature perfect on all its sides, which is the dominant idea of poetry’ 4 did not seem to be leading to a new, unified poetic tradition. No dominant figure had emerged to fill the space left by Tennyson. After four years of indecision, 1896 saw the appointment as Poet Laureate of Alfred Austin, a writer almost universally thought to be outmoded and undistinguished. But in any case, many writers were uninterested in the figure of ‘The Poet’ as a single

authority, ostensibly speaking for the whole of society. The late 1880s saw the emergence of poetry like that of ‘Michael Field’, the joint work of aunt and niece Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, or the Jewish, lesbian poet Amy Levy. The ballad was revived as a form of ‘unofficial’ poetry, by Rudyard Kipling, John Davidson, and Stevenson himself.⁵ As poetry failed to find a generalised bourgeois readership, it was increasingly published in small print runs, decorative books, or specialist magazines.

In these circumstances, it can be constructive actively to consider Stevenson a ‘minor poet’ rather than to dismiss him as such. He certainly fits two of T. S. Eliot’s suggestions for inclusion in such a category: the few of his poems that are well-known are largely encountered in anthologies, and (to use the terms of Eliot’s estimation of Ben Jonson’s poetry), ‘we cannot say [...] that the whole is more than the sum of his parts’.⁶ But neither of these criteria would have disappointed Stevenson himself. He was writing in a decade in which ‘minor’ poetry filled a conspicuous gap. Richard le Gallienne, a popular poet and admirer of Stevenson, lectured on ‘The Minor Poet’⁷ and was appropriately reviewed as one himself in the *New York Times* (Sept. 8, 1985, p. 27) in a review which started ‘In these days of minor poets Richard Le Gallienne has pushed his way forward far enough to attract the attention of many literary critics, who would no doubt be glad to engage in the consideration of larger lyric personages. But large poets are not at all numerous at present’. Stevenson called his first adult collection *Underwoods* (borrowing the title from Jonson), to suggest that his poems grew in the shade of his more significant work. But the title also resonates with the state of poetry in general in the 1880s and 1890s as it started to emerge from the long shadows of the great Victorian figures of Tennyson and Browning. New poets did not feel the need to strive to be epic or universal, but were increasingly individualistic, seeing themselves part of small

coteries rather than extensive traditions. A large number of the poems in *Underwoods* are very personal, addressed to Stevenson's friends, many of them fellow writers and artists.

It was becoming increasingly difficult for poets to get published and the literary market began to fragment into small-circulation magazines and private presses. Poets began to form small special-interest groups in which they could work out their own criteria for poetry, rather than striving to be part of a continuous, national tradition. The subject of poetry turns increasingly to the ways in which the world is experienced by the individual, rather than ways in which it can be assessed or analysed. In reaction to Arnoldian ideas of the moral purposefulness of poetry, many poets turned to what became known as aestheticism--the idea that art should not be any kind of social arbiter, but should be a way of exploring one's own feelings and impulses, set free from social restraints and often in opposition to them. Common themes included visiting prostitutes, taking drugs, and wandering through lamp-lit cities at night time (a style of writing often labelled 'decadent'). We can see some of Stevenson's early poetic experiments heading in this direction as he inhabits the voice of the disaffected poet, looking out into a blurred street scene while his 'brain swims empty and light' and he observes from a distance: 'A girl or two at play in a corner of a waste-land / Tumbling and showing their legs and crying out to me loosely' (p. 260) (Stevenson notices quite a few ladies' legs in his early poems). Stevenson did not directly continue this kind of writing in his poetry, although he was to transfer its urban dreamscapes to prose in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. But the turn to the aesthetic was always more than the idea that 'art' was largely a life-style choice. In their reconsideration of 'art' as a category, writers like Walter Pater insisted that it should have a vitality that impressed itself on the mind in intense, but fleeting moments that escape rational scrutiny: 'It is with this movement,

with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off.’⁸

Impressionism, the sense that artists and writers should describe what they feel and see, rather than what they intellectually know to be there, links Stevenson’s children’s writing with his adult poetry. To the speaker of *A Child’s Garden of Verses* the world is one of vivid but often impermanent impressions that either defy or forgo analysis. The child imagines the wind as a man riding by and asks ‘Late at night when the fires are out, / Why does he gallop and gallop about?’ (p.27) But there is no explanation and the poem never makes the rider a clear simile for the wind. Many single poems are just glimpses of observed or imagined phenomena cast loose of any clarifying context or explanation or reaction:

The rain is raining all around,
It falls on field and tree,
It rains on the umbrellas here,
And on the ships at sea. (p.26)

Arthur Symonds, whose promotion of French symbolist poetry was influential on Yeats and the modernist poets of the next generation, was also an acute spokesman for the poetry of the end of the nineteenth century, and advocates a verse in which ‘Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically.’⁹ The meaning or object of a poem is not something that precedes it or that the poem describes, but something that emerges ‘magically’ from the poem itself. His own early collection *Days and Nights* (1889) uses not only the simple metres of *A Child’s Garden* but also the same sensibilities evoked by impressions rather than descriptive statements. In ‘The Fisher’s Widow’ the subject’s grief is filtered through her experience of natural phenomena:

The boats go out and the boats come in
 Under the wintry sky;
 And the rain and foam are white in the wind,
 And the white gulls cry
 [...]

She sees the torn sails fly in the foam
 Broad on the skyline grey;
 And the boats go out and the boats come in,
 But there's one away.¹⁰

We might compare this evocation of an adult consciousness with the child of 'Where go the Boats?' whose solitariness is suggested through similar imagery, syntax and vocabulary:

Green leaves a-floating,
 Castles of the foam
 Boats of mine a-boating--
 Where will all come home? (p. 30)

To set Stevenson in these contexts is to reveal how careful he was as a poet, and how interested in changing ideas about poetic form. Stevenson wrote poetry that was intensely personal, but he also wrote poetry that reads like an exercise in writing poetry itself. In a letter to le Gallienne he complains of the reading public: 'The little, artificial popularity of style in England tends, I think, to die out; the British pig returns to his true love, the love of the styleless, of the shapeless, of the slapdash and the disorderly.'¹¹ He is here referring in particular to prose, but his insistence on the importance of 'style' is evident everywhere in his writing. Stevenson's poetic language often works very hard at the craft of poetry—he has a fine control of assonance, internal rhyme, and the

counterpoint of line- and sentence-structure, and the distribution of different impressions across parts of speech. Even his recommendations for style in prose make it sound like poetry:

The beauty of the contents of a phrase, or of a sentence, depends implicitly upon alliteration and upon assonance. The vowel demands to be repeated; the consonant demands to be repeated; and both cry aloud to be perpetually varied. You may follow the adventures of a letter through any passage that has particularly pleased you; find it, perhaps, denied a while, to tantalise the ear; find it fired again at you in a whole broadside; or find it pass into congenerous sounds, one liquid or labial melting away into another.¹²

These techniques are everywhere in Stevenson's poetry. In the following example verbs ('gloomed') and nouns ('missile') as well as adjectives do the work of description, and the poem uses internal rhymes ('laggard'/'haggard') and assonance ('scowling town') as a kind of aural impressionism to evoke his sense of the city in winter:

In our wild climate, in our scowling town,
We gloomed and shivered, sorrowed, sobbed and feared
The belching winter wind, the missile rain,
The rare and welcome silence of the snows,
The laggard morn, the haggard day, the night,
The grimy spell of the nocturnal town. (pp.189-9)

If this reads like an exercise in writing poetry, it paid off. Much of Stevenson's best verse shows this very tight control of rhythm and metre, as a frame to carry his more imagistic language. Stevenson was writing at a time when many poets were testing form and imagery, and critics were formulating ways of thinking about art as an end in itself. The

mere subject matter of a poem, argued Walter Pater, was ‘nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling.’¹³

Stevenson himself moves restlessly between different poetic forms: blank verse, sonnets, ballad quatrains, free verse, the complex Scottish metre of Burns and the eighteenth century, and a number of song-like forms. But much of his verse, rather than letting existing forms determine the measurement of sense, focuses instead on the relationship between word and sound, the fine local control of rhythm and metre, and way a poem’s shape describes a line of thought. A good example of this is ‘Skerryvore: the Parallel’. The puzzling title refers to Stevenson’s house in Bournemouth, which he named after a lighthouse constructed by his father and uncle and which summons up his recurrent anxiety that he has not lived up to the expectations of the Stevensons, engineers and lighthouse builders. But the poem itself does not address these concerns directly, rather allowing them to emerge through its careful placing of words:

Here all is sunny, and when the truant gull
 Skims the green level of the lawn, his wing
 Dispetals roses; here the house is framed
 Of kneaded brick and the plumed mountain pine,
 Such clay as artists fashion and such wood
 As the tree-climbing urchin breaks. But there
 Eternal granite hewn from the living isle
 And dowelled with brute iron, rears a tower
 That from its wet foundation to its crown
 Of glittering glass, stands, in the sweep of winds,
 Immovable, immortal, eminent. (pp. 96-7)

The parallel of the title is played out in the poem. The soft, doughy ‘kneaded brick’ of the Bournemouth Skerryvore contrasts strikingly with the ‘brute iron’ that runs throughout the lighthouse. The poem consists of two sentences, hinging on the mid-line break which leads into the spectacular contrast between the mutable Bournemouth home and the lighthouse of ‘Eternal granite’. And this itself forms a contrast with early run-on lines like ‘his wing / Dispetals rose’ where the graceful precision of the bird in flight momentarily holds up the line so that we notice the delicate action of removing the petals of the flower. The internal half-rhyme (‘dowelled’/’tower’) drives the poem forward during the long second sentence, building up to the delayed verb ‘stands’, until it comes to halt with the three words ‘Immovable, immortal, eminent’ occupying the entire line as if to preclude anything more being said on the subject because the lighthouse itself justifies its own existence. As Pater had suggested, the form itself is the ‘spirit’ of the poem.

The very precise image of the gull’s wing that ‘dispetals roses’ is quite typical of Stevenson, who often constructs verbs in this way, with prefixes that suggest change or movement. In ‘The Woodman’, which I discuss later in this chapter, an ‘inarboured’ ravine suggests one that has become taken over by forest, rather than just a wooded, or ‘arboured’ place. The environment of Stevenson’s poetry is one of impermanence, instability, loss and constant change. There are few fixed points in time or space from which the poet can contemplate a static object. Stevenson was particularly fond of using ‘dis-’ as a verbal prefix, a technique which conjures up this sense of a world in which things could easily split up, change form, lose shape, or disappear altogether. This is a world never quite present before the viewing subject, but always slipping out of focus, or losing pieces of itself. Again in ‘The Woodman’, the ‘dislusted leaves’ (p. 196) carry a ghostly echo of their former sheen, and in a poem to his sister-in-law, he writes: ‘The

unfathomable sea, and time, and tears, / [...] Dispart us' (p. 79) where the verb 'dispart', means not just to part, but to part in opposite directions.

In a poem to W. E. Henley, Stevenson imagines Henley's own art surmounting the sanatorium where he was at the time confined:

the gaunt ward
Dislimns and disappears, and, opening out,
Shows brooks and forests, and the blue beyond
Of mountains. (pp. 84-5)

To 'dislimn' is a particularly interesting word, and one which Stevenson evidently liked. Its meaning of 'to obliterate the outlines' carries echoes of the verb to 'limn', originally meaning to illuminate mediaeval manuscripts but in its modern sense more usually applied to the painting of watercolours. Stevenson uses it in a way that draws attention to closeness of works of art and intense states of feeling. In the novel *St Ives* he uses it to express the sense of the narrator's loss of security in his own identity as someone watches him: 'My face seemed to myself to dislimn under his gaze.'¹⁴ In a letter of November, 1883 Stevenson wrote of his feelings on the death (which he found very troubling) of his friend from student days, Walter Ferrier: 'I feel as if the earth were undermined, and all my friends have lost one thickness of reality since that one passed. Those are happy who can take it otherwise: with that I found things all beginning to dislimn.'¹⁵ Dislimning then is the sense that the world is not itself solid or stable—the world is a text itself, like a limned manuscript, that has different layers, or 'thicknesses', of reality. Even when Henley's artistry 'dislimns' the sanatorium ward, it is to 'open out' on a new backdrop, like a stage set.

The French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98) argued that poetry should engage the eye as much as the ear, and that rather than offering song-like

resolutions with regular rhythms and end-rhymes, the verse form should be free to use complex syntax or line –formation that might require the reader to look both forward and backwards in the poem. ‘Skerryvore: the Parallel’ works like this, moving our attention between nodal points in the two sentences, and driving the sense across the line-endings without coming to a rest. Poetry, according to symbolist ideas, should not contain unitary feelings, or sum up single ideas, but should allow infinite suggestion. Rather than delivering a single mood that might be contained in the language of the poem, symbolist poetry allows language to throw up different meaning in during the course of a single poem, and to suggest new meanings from the relations of different parts of the poem.

A great deal of Stevenson’s poetry is written to appeal to the voice (a good example is the stanza that opens this chapter). But much of it complicates the aural aspect of poetry by exploring the intricate verse forms that were emerging at the time in France. Two consecutive poems in *Underwoods* testify to the different styles he could use and the way his poetry looks both forwards and backwards in literary history and will help us understand Stevenson’s position in the history of poetry. A poem to his friend, the American artist Will H. Low is written in a by then outworn late Romantic tradition, with some routine rhymes and metre, diluted pastoralism, and stock imagery which calls to mind William Sharp’s criticism that Stevenson was sometimes guilty of ‘infringement of Keats’s literary patent’ 16:

Youth now flees on feathered foot,
Faint and fainter sounds the flute,
Rarer songs of gods; and still
Somewhere on the sunny hill
Or along the winding stream,
Through the willows flits a dream. (p.79)

But if Mr Low's poem is uninspired, his wife's is completely different. 'To Mrs. Will H. Low' starts:

Even in the bluest noonday of July,
 There could not run the smallest breath of wind
 But all the quarter sounded like a wood;
 And in the chequered silence and above
 The hum of city cabs that sought the Bois,
 Suburban ashes shivered into song. (p. 80)

This strikes the reader as much more modern. The 'winding stream' of Mr Low's poem becomes an impressionist city-scape, and the sound of Pan's flute changes into the noise of cabs (still horse-drawn at this point, but their wheels humming mechanically). Rather than nature taking the role of a lost idyll, the natural and urban worlds melt into each other so that the noises of Paris are 'like a wood'. The imagery rejects the easy choice of the willow-flitting dream of the William Low poem, and instead becomes a complex painting of the urban scene which works through comparisons, coalescences and differences. The 'chequered silence' and the ashes that shiver into song is an example of synesthesia, crossing the sense of sight and hearing and allowing the experience of the poem to emerge through analogy rather than direct statement. The poem is 'suburban' not just because it describes the suburbs, but also because it questions, in a speculative way, the relationship between the city and nature. Rather than the natural world acting as a retreat from the artifice of the city (a common Romantic motif), nature here seems almost an image for the city, where bodily activities (humming or shivering) describe an urban experience. In a manner that is usually associated with literary modernism, the outer and inner worlds of perceived and affective life blend almost seamlessly together. (Linda Dowling calls this *fin-de-siècle* mode 'urban pastoral', 17). Arthur Symonds wrote,

‘I think that might be the test of poetry which professes to be modern: its capacity for dealing with London, with what one might see there, indoors or out’¹⁸, and although Stevenson’s verse is perhaps more associated with rural scenes, it is surprising to note how many of his poems are about the city.

The relationship between the two Low poems asks us to address the charge that Stevenson’s poetry can be nostalgic, affected, or even sentimental, categories that have not been greatly valued since Stevenson’s death. Reading his poetry in the twenty-first century, his use of poetic archaisms can seem jarring in a line that is otherwise strikingly modern. But this was quite common in the poetry of the period, and not merely a mechanical resort to ‘poetic’ language. Tracing such a tendency in poetry to Walter Pater’s interest in Euphuism (self-consciously high-flown literary language), Linda Dowling has argued that it marks the feeling that poetry should be aware of its own past, and can be seen as ‘assiduous attention to the complex linguistic textures of old and new, archaism and neology.’¹⁹

The charge of nostalgia nevertheless demands some serious attention. A great many of Stevenson’s poems are about the loss of home (one original meaning of ‘nostalgia’ is home-sickness) and of childhood. Modern critics are quick to leap on late-Victorian culture as betraying a whimsical idealisation of simpler states of existence to compensate for complex and painful social realities. But much of Stevenson’s poetry suggests the unavailability of the kind of shared assumptions that nostalgia tends to promote. His period was noted not only for what we now see as sentimental longing for the past, but also a renewed scientific interest in the functions of memory. As Linda M. Austin and Cairns Craig have, in different ways, shown, late nineteenth-century literature is bound up in such questions as how memory works, whether it has a bodily origin, how

images relate to each other in the mind, whether memory is active or passive.²⁰

Stevenson's apparently nostalgic writing is part of this inquiry.

Despite the way he circles around familiar addressees, seeming to appeal to mutual experiences, much of Stevenson's poetry turns inwards to a close scrutiny of the individual, unshared memory. The children of *A Child's Garden of Verses* play by themselves, or with the child's own shadow which abandons him at the end of the poem, or in the company of an imaginary 'Unseen Playmate'. This poem opens with the strange image of even a plurality of children playing 'alone': 'When children are playing alone on the green' (p. 47) The culmination of 'A Good Play' is the absence of a playmate: 'But Tom fell out and hurt his knee, / So there was no one else but me' (p. 29).

These simple poems are in fact quite complex, inhabiting a strange and multiple temporality of human experience that John Hollander sums up perfectly: 'a complex dialectic of projected adulthood and recollected childhood.'²¹ It is never quite clear whether the speakers of the poems are children rehearsing for adulthood, or the adult poet ventriloquising his lost past. There are numerous examples of this doubled stance, and Hollander gives one of the best from the poem 'Travel', where the child adventurer imagines coming upon an abandoned city in the desert: 'All its children, sweep and prince, / Grown to manhood ages since' (p. 28). As Hollander puts it: 'The child reaches in his journey the house of childhood to find nobody home.'²² We might also note 'My bed is a boat' where the relations of bed and boat are not quite clear—on the one hand the bed is transformed in the child's imagination into the ship of an exciting adventure, but on the other the bed carries associations of not only sleep but death in which the child shuts his eyes to 'sail away / And see and hear no more' (p.41). The child of this poem takes to bed with him a rather curious item:

And sometimes things to bed I take,
 As prudent sailors have to do;
 Perhaps a slice of wedding-cake,
 Perhaps a toy or two. (p.41)

Generally speaking, neither children nor sailors routinely take wedding cake to bed with them. The status of this ‘thing’, as the child puts it, is not apparent; the child is at once charmingly naïve to the grown up writer, and strangely anticipatory of an adult world which is both ‘prudent’ (an unchildlike word) and sexualised. The temporality of human life in *A Child’s Garden of Verses* is not linear or incremental, and in a later poem, Stevenson expresses a shocking version of this. On his last visit to the near-death Thomas Stevenson, he sees his father as a ‘changeling’, just as his father is being invited to recognise his own son:

 ‘Look!’ said one,
 Unkindly kind, look up, it is your boy!’
 And the dread changeling gazed on me in vain. (p. 200)

Stevenson’s children do not often comment on their feelings, which can make it difficult to establish the relation between the child speaker and the adult poet. It is not quite clear what we should make of the relativistic joke of ‘Foreign Children’ where various ‘races’ are asked ‘Don’t you wish that you were me?’:

You have curious things to eat,
 I am fed on proper meat;
 You must dwell beyond the foam,
 But I am safe and live at home. (p. 38)

As with William Blake's children (the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was an influence on *A Child's Garden*) it is difficult to tell quite how knowing this child is and thus how far we should take the poem as a satire on imperialist attitudes.

The tension in this poem between the insular security of 'home' and its alternative relativity is very common in Stevenson's poetry. A great traveller himself, he was one of the first modern writers to explore the sense of dislocation and rootlessness that globalisation could arouse. A good example of this is a poem in *Songs of Travel* addressed to "S. C.", Sidney Colvin. The poem follows Stevenson's progress and thoughts as, kept awake by the sound of the sea, he wanders round the island of Apemama during a stormy night and remembers Colvin's residence in the British Museum in London where he was keeper of prints and drawings. Stevenson imagines himself back there:

[...] there again

In the upper room I lay, and heard far off

The unsleeping city murmur like a shell;

The muffled tramp of the Museum guard

Once more went by me; I beheld again

Lamps vainly brighten the dispeopled street; (p. 191)

The poem, to use Stevenson's favourite term, dislimns the contours of place, blurring both the separate geographical locations of London and Apemama, and the distinction between experience and memory. Like a great deal of Stevenson's work, this poem meditates on the idea of 'home' and Stevenson sent Colvin a copy with a letter discussing his thoughts on the subject: 'now that my father is done with his troubles, and 17 Heriot Row no more than a mere shell, you and that gaunt old Monument in Bloomsbury are all that I have in view when I use the word home'²³ 'Home' is a word that Stevenson used a

great deal, sometimes repeatedly in the same poem as if trying to establish its reality by dint of repetition (as in 'Requiem'). Here it becomes an empty signifier, a word that can be 'used' in certain contexts, rather than possessing its own, felt meaning. Like the Stevenson family's former house in Heriot Row, Edinburgh, it is a 'shell', a word Stevenson picks out of the poem, in which the 'unsleeping city murmur[s] like a shell'. The city, which Stevenson wants to be made palpable through his memories, becomes increasingly blurred as it merges both with the island, and with Stevenson's own mind. Much as he tries to make the content of his memories of the city (the sound of traffic or birdsong) real to him, he finds the city acting as a sea-shell, an empty container that produces phantom sounds. 'Dispeopled' (one of Stevenson's 'dis'- words) conjures up a sense of the spectral city; the word summons the uncanny shadows of absent people.

As the poem progresses, Stevenson imagines Colvin going to work in the Museum and another reversal takes place. Colvin passes two statues brought to London from Polynesia:

Far-voyaging island gods, begrimed with smoke,
 Sit now unworshipped, the rude monument
 Of faiths forgot and races undivined:
 Sit now disconsolate, remembering well
 The priest, the victim, and the songful crowd,
 The blaze of the blue noon, and that huge voice,
 Incessant, of the breakers on the shore. (p. 192)

Increasingly both the 'home' of Britain and the 'foreign' Pacific islands melt into each other. Like the dispeopled street, the unworshipped statues are haunted by the absent figures of their original society, and here, to use William Sharp's phrase, Stevenson infringes Keats's literary patent to good effect. The poem explicitly echoes Keats's 'Ode

on a Grecian Urn' where Keats contemplates a similarly de-contextualised scene of religious sacrifice, but Stevenson transposes its classical relation to a colonial one. Where Keats's poem offers at least some sense of continuities between the aesthetic values of the classical past and present, Stevenson is even more ambivalent. Removed from their Pacific context, the statues are monuments to 'faiths forgot and races undivined', bearing witness to the colonising society's inability to accept that colonised peoples have independent histories. Here Stevenson makes it difficult to distinguish between his own memories of London, and the statues' memories of their island. The statues in London remember the islands, and Stevenson, in the islands, remembers the statues remembering the islands. The sounds of the 'breakers on the shore' with which the poem opened become more vivid in the statues' memory than in Stevenson's direct experience. The poem questions which is more real, the imperial 'home' of London or its supposed global peripheries, the site of myths and exoticism. We are reminded of Stevenson's novella *The Ebb-Tide*, in which one of the destitute Western adventurers washed up on the beach imagines himself back in London, the imperial centre, as an insubstantial fantasy and 'home' as an absurd memory.

Anne Colley notes that Stevenson's 'nostalgic' writing is not a simple act of idealisation, or patriotism, or mourning for a lost childhood, but an intricate response to the structure of recollection, the interplay of past and present, of object and feeling. Stevenson's nostalgia, Colley argues, is always ambiguous, caught between longing for past states and places and a contrary impulse that recognises why he left them in the first place.²⁴ These ambiguities are heightened by the Pacific settings of the later poems. In the poem to Colvin, the statues refuse to act as clear objects in the past to be recalled by the remembering mind of the colonising Stevenson.

The island locations of his Pacific travels allow Stevenson to explore forms of geographical location, or dislocation. A poem, for Stevenson, is almost a geographical space itself in which objects from the past can be brought together. The philosopher of place, Edward S. Casey, writes that ‘any given place serves to hold together dispersed things, animate or inanimate; it *regionalizes* them, giving them a single shared space in which to be together.’²⁵ Stevenson’s poetry tends to highlight the difficulty of this exercise. We have already seen in the ‘To S. C.’ how the relation of the remembering mind and the thing remembered becomes unclear when they cannot exist together in one space.

Stevenson moves continually between literal and metaphorical models of global space. The possibility that one might physically be at any point on the globe often arises in his poetry. Even the small child is routinely aware of global time and a world mapped by temporal zones:

And when at eve I rise from tea,
Day dawns beyond the Atlantic Sea;
And all the children in the West
Are getting up and being dressed. (p. 39)

One of Stevenson’s very best poems, ‘The tropics vanish’, explores this dislocated world where a modern consciousness of entire, global space gives rise to the recognition of the relativity of our experience of it. The speaker of this poem, as his immediate surroundings on a Pacific island fade away, imagines his gaze moving north through Scotland until he arrives at Edinburgh, both his first home and the grave of his ancestors. At first this seems like a straightforward act of cartography. Anne Colley has commented on Stevenson’s sense of the past as a map: ‘Stevenson composed his fiction so that he could vicariously wind his way through the landscape of home. To do this he relied upon

the abstracted space of maps.’²⁶ In ‘The tropics vanish’ Stevenson’s spatial imagination travels ‘From Halkerside, from topmost Allermuir, / Or steep Caerketton’ p. 190). He lists these Borders place-names as if trying to enclose them within a precise cartographic space, their repeated sounds (the consonant *k* and the phoneme *al*) seemingly giving them a natural relationship. But the poem does not sustain such acts of containment. The focus expands and then contracts again, dizzily drawing the reader across vast oceans spaces, and closing in on the solitary child. The swing of the verse, with its long sentence, delayed verbs, and echoing vowels, draw the reader to the phrase ‘in vain’, emphasising the fallibility of global reckonings of spatiality. External measurements, like the tropics, ‘vanish’, leaving an internal memorial space:

Continents

And continental oceans intervene;
A sea uncharted, on a lampless isle,
Environs and confines their wandering child:
In vain. The voice of generations dead
Summons me, sitting distant, to arise,
My numerous footsteps nimbly to retrace,
And, all mutation over, stretch me down
In that denoted city of the dead. (p. 191)

The poem does not contrast Stevenson’s doubled locations as much as it makes the space between them incommensurable. Distance is no longer the interval between two points: the points seem to merge into each other, as we saw in ‘To S. C.’, the poem which appears alongside ‘The tropics vanish’ in *Songs of Travel*. The poem proposes an elevated position from which we can see global phenomena (continents and oceans), but far from assuming a navigable globe that one might easily cross, the poet’s spatial

imagination is dizzyingly variable. The huge, generalised movements of the land masses and oceans, as they ‘environ’ and ‘intervene’, fail to pin down the tiny point of the ‘wandering child’. The sea is ‘uncharted’, unmapped. In the poem’s ambivalent ending, it is only the precision of the Stevenson family (the ‘artificers’ whose engineering finesse seems to extend to their own tombs), that can measure place in the ‘denoted’, or spatial fixed city of the dead.²⁷

One of Stevenson’s longer (and stranger) poems brings many of these ideas together. It is a work far from the better-known and anthologised poems such as ‘Requiem’, ‘I will bring you brooches’ or ‘Blows the wind today’. The metre of ‘The Woodman’ recalls Andrew Marvell, and in other ways too it updates Marvell’s seventeenth-century wrangling with the relation between art and nature. Stevenson, now living in Vailima, decides to clear a path up the hill behind his house, but encounters the immensity of the natural world:

The green

Inarbour'd talus and ravine
By fathoms. By the multitude,
The rugged columns of the wood
And bunches of the branches stood:
Thick as a mob, deep as a sea,
And silent as eternity. (p. 195)

The difficulty of cutting through the natural growth mirrors the task of turning it into poetry. The woods are silent and the scene cannot easily be measured. They form a uniform ‘green’ which threatens to obscure the geographical distinctions of the scene and (as in Marvell’s poetry) merge the images of land and sea, and the speaker has to impose poetic tropes upon it with repeated similes.

Stevenson casts around for a narrative that will substitute for this profound sense of alienation. Late Romantic ideas of natural places haunted by nature spirits desert him. Forms of 'nature worship' were becoming popular in literature at the end of the century, and to see how distinctive Stevenson's writing is we can briefly compare it with 'Tree Worship' by Richard le Gallienne (which appeared in the same volume as le Gallienne's not very good elegy for Stevenson himself). For le Gallienne, the structure of the poem is straightforward, and starts somewhat like 'The Woodman'. He notes the impenetrability and alien feeling of natural growth: 'Knotted and warted, slabbed and armoured like the hide / Of tropic elephant; unstormable and steep.'²⁸

But the tree soon becomes the index of popular history: it is the 'dread haunted palace of bat and owl' of early superstition and the scene of grisly executions in the eighteenth century. More importantly, there is a direct relation between the tree and speaker who asks, 'I seek a god, old tree: accept my worship, thou!'²⁹ and links the force and vitality of the tree to his own desire for life and potency. Stevenson's poem is very different in its refusal of these kinds of links and continuities. In 'The Woodman' Stevenson's labourer has fled, believing the woods to be haunted, but the poet cannot insert himself into any mythological continuity' and the woods remain 'Unmeaning, undivined' (p. 196). The gods of the poem are 'disinvested' (p. 196), another 'dis'- word, suggesting not only that they have lost their formal investiture as gods, but also that no one is investing faith in them any more. Where le Gallienne's poem slips neatly into its history lesson and nature worship, Stevenson's grows almost as out of control as the undergrowth, although he remains in command of his careful metre. There is no clear distinction between 'vegetable king and priest / And stripling'(p. 196), and the profusion of life and energy seems indistinguishable from death and killing: Stevenson is like a 'beast' killing the plants which themselves fight for life as 'the green murderer throve and

spread' (p. 197). In its effort to make narrative sense of the experience the poem circles round possible mythic, literary and historical analogies without ever alighting on any of them. It ranges from the medieval poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*, though the 'Black Hole of Calcutta', to a very modern (and rather un-Victorian) despair of war and imperialism in which 'pale battalions' of potential soldiers trample over London Bridge without caring if they live or die (p. 197), and clerks consign children to death 'with a diligent pen' (p. 198).³⁰

In a long letter to Colvin, Stevenson describes the nature of the undergrowth. One of his chief vegetable enemies in the poem is 'the toothed and killing sensitive' plant:

I found a great bed of *kuikui* – sensitive plant—our deadliest enemy. A fool brought it to this island in a pot, and used to lecture and sentimentalise over the tender thing. The tender thing has now taken charge of this island, and men fight it, with torn hands, for bread and life. A singular, insidious thing, shrinking and biting like a weasel; clutching by its roots as a limpet clutches at a rock. ³¹

The poem, which uses the shrinking and biting image, omits the detail that the plant has been brought from outside the island, that it is potentially an image for Stevenson himself as coloniser ('The Woodman' was to lead to Stevenson's novella of imperial disenchantment, *The Beach of Falesà*). But the poem already warns us not to sentimentalise Stevenson. Its speaker is someone who cannot be part of his surroundings, either geographical or historical, a much darker and more desperate figure than we commonly read in his poetry. Stevenson, himself a 'sensitive plant' who had come to Samoa to escape the Scottish climate, depicts himself as a destroyer of his own environment, evoking Housman's later version of him: 'All flesh lies taken at his will / And every fowl of air'.

1. Paul Maixner (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), p.259.
2. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Collected Poems*, ed. Roger C. Lewis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p.88.
3. A. E. Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.222.
4. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.67.
5. For these and other poets of the 1880s and 1890s see Joseph Bristow (ed.), *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).
6. T. S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry?' in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 47.
7. Holbrook Jackson, *The 1890s: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, intro. Malcolm Bradbury (London, Cresset Library, 1988), p.190.
8. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.151-2.
9. Arthur Symons, *Selected Writings*, ed. Roger Holdsworth (Manchester: Carcanet, 1974), p.83.
10. Ibid., p. 27.
11. Maixner, *Critical Heritage*, p.395.
12. Glenda Norquay, *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction: An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. 1999), p.104.

13. Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.86.
14. Stevenson, *St Ives*, Tusitala Edition (London: William Heinemann, 1924), p. 224.
15. *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1994-5), vol. 4, p. 206.
16. Maixner, *Critical Heritage*, p. 268.
17. Linda C. Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 221.
18. Arthur Symons, 'Modernity in Verse', in *Studies in Two Literatures* (London: Leonard Smithers 1897) p. 88. The 'revolutionary' modern poet here described is none other than Stevenson's friend W. E. Henley.
19. Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 123.
20. Linda M. Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition: 1780-1917* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), pp.15-23; Cairns Craig, *Associationism and the Literary Imagination: From the Phantasmal Chaos* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 239-84.
21. John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 133.
22. Ibid., p. 134.
23. *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 337.
24. Anne C. Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 157-91.
25. Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 202.
26. Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection*, p. 179.

27. In her groundbreaking first collected edition of the Poems: Janet Adam Smith thinks Stevenson originally wrote 'devoted' and this has been reprinted in some subsequent editions. The manuscript, however, does read 'denoted.'

28. Richard Le Gallienne, (1895), *Robert Louis Stevenson: an Elegy and Other Poems* (London: John Lane, 1895), p.18.

29. Ibid., p. 13.

30. Although we should be cautious about spotting 'pre-echoes' of literary modernism in Stevenson, we might compare his poem of inaccessible vegetation myths, deathly clerks, and senseless crowds moving over London Bridge with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).

31. *Letters*, vol. 7, p. 26.

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